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AUTHOR Randall, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for taking oral histories are presented in this guide. The guide was developed for a project to teach Nicaraguan literacy teachers how to record personal narratives for the purpose of preserving cultural history and heritage. An introductory chapter discusses the distinction and relationship between "testimony," which generally requires interviewing, and "history," which is largely archival, and emphasizes that this form of oral history is being recorded from the point of view of ordinary people, not the dominant classes. The second chapter offers specific techniques for taking oral histories, including the preparation stage, development of questionnaires, interviewing, using a tape recorder, taking notes, transcription, creating an archive, and ethical considerations. Chapter three addresses the gathering of complementary information, such as supporting documents and materials and graphic material, including photographs. Montage or assembly of the testimony is the subject of the next chapter. Editing and the inclusion of the interviewer in the testimony are discussed here. A brief final chapter offers suggestions for evaluating the work and the product. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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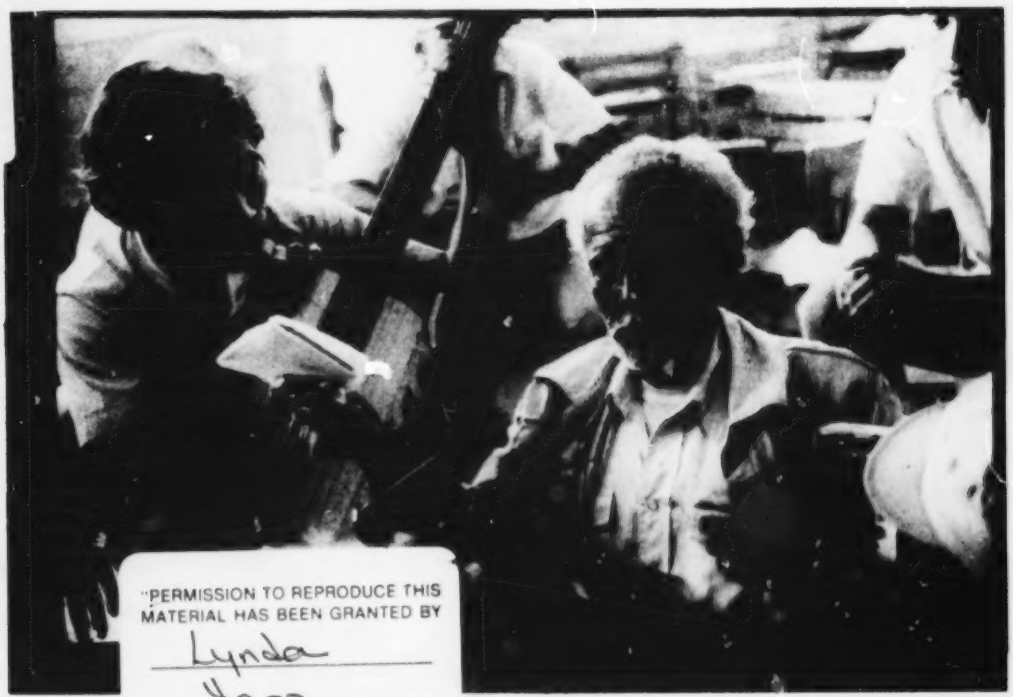

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A Guide To Oral History

by Margaret Randall

FL 800 710

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Testimonios:

A Guide To Oral History

by Margaret Randall

photos by Deborah Barndt

The following people were involved in the production of this booklet: David Sobel, Janice Acton, Amy Gottlieb, Mary Sherlock, Donna Scagliotti, Lynda Yanz and David Smith

The Participatory Research Group is a non-profit collective of adult educators and researchers working for progressive social change. Since 1976 we have produced a range of analytical and popular materials. We also produce a bi-annual newsletter, organize workshops and conferences. We have worked with labour, native, community, women's and public interest groups in the area of popular and adult education, organizational development, research and evaluation.

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Introduction

Since July 1979, Nicaragua has given inspiration to socialists, feminists, popular educators and trade unionists around the world. The revolutionary process has fostered creative solutions to problems and brought a new perspective on how social change occurs. With this has come a rebirth of culture involving people from every aspect of Nicaraguan society. All who wish to communicate are encouraged to do so - be they campesinos or 'professional' artists and writers .

Shortly after the defeat of Somoza, Margaret Randall conducted a series of seminars in which she urged that 'ordinary' Nicaraguans be their own historians -listen to the experiences of each other and build a popular history written by the people themselves. Movements and changes in Canada are less dramatic than those of Nicaragua. Yet the collection of testimony is going on here too, allowing people to recognize that their personal histories are similar to those of others.

By understanding that 'the personal is political', the women's movement has used oral history, allowing women to make connections in each other's lives. Trade unionists discover that health hazards remained in a particular industry for decades and methods to improve working conditions have been met with the same forms of opposition for years. A grade school oral history program in Saskatchewan for grandparents and grandchildren led to a mutual appreciation of the difficulties faced by the two generations. The members of a co-operative store are empowered when they discover a group of farmers organized in a similar fashion fifty years earlier. Peace activists can draw strength through knowing that each World War saw thousands organize for world disarmament.

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The following history lessons from Nicaragua suggest a way to put history-writing into the hands of both Nicaraguans and Canadians. Oral history is about building bridges. It is a way of making connections between people and unearthing the richness of human experience and struggle. It helps in the building of bridges across time and place, fuelling a revolution in Nicaragua and helping the transformation here in Canada.

– Participatory Research Group
Toronto, 1985.

Preface

Less than two months after the Sandinista victory in July 1979, I got a call from Nicaragua's new Ministry of Culture. They wanted me to write a book about Nicaraguan women and "could I give a seminar on oral history at the same time?". I was much clearer about what researching and producing a book on Nicaraguan women would mean, than I was on what kind of an oral history seminar they wanted and needed, but I immediately said yes to both proposals--caught up as I was (and am) in my deep admiration for the Nicaraguan people and the extraordinary struggle they had won.

I wrote the first four "lectures" while still in Cuba. My sense of what might be needed, then, came from my own experience, working with teams of Cuban interviewers during the putting together of several such projects there (Cuban Women Now, Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution, (the story of Doris Tijerino), No se puede hacer la revolucion sin nosotras, El pueblo no solo es testigo; la historia de Dominga, Sueños y realidades de un guajiricantor, etc.) and from my imagined sense of what might be useful to the Nicaraguans in this respect.

When I arrived in Nicaragua in late October, I found that a consciousness regarding the importance of oral history--not only as a vehicle for recording the present, but as a tool for recuperating a collective identity out of the past as well--was something most people had, spoke of, used! This consciousness had been actively ignited and stimulated by many of the leaders of the revolution, themselves poets or writers, as interested in discovering the authentic Nicaraguan person (out of generations of distorted history) as they were in preserving the new political order and creating the institutions necessary to a more just society.

All of this meant that, when I gave the seminar on oral history at the Ministry of Culture in December, it was attended not only by "historians", in the more conventional sense of the term, but by representatives of the different mass organizations, delegates sent by the Armed Forces, the Police, the Women's Organization, the Youth Movement, the Ministry of Education, radio and television stations, Catholic social services, peasant bases and indigenous groupings! The sixty or more who shared the four days of discussion were highly skilled researchers at one of Managua's two universities - they were barely literate women and men who had recently emerged from a difficult war and knew their story (and that of their comrades) was important. They were old and they were young -the single thing which seemed to link them was the fact that they were Nicaraguans... and their gut knowledge that the reconstruction of a people's history is essential to its role in consolidating a national identity.

All this, of course, explains why, in the following pages, you will find insights from the writings of Walter Benjamin as well as basic instructions on how to use and care for a tape recorder. Testimonios (the most frequently-used term for oral history, in Spanish and in Latin America) was first printed up in a mimeographed edition for those attending the original seminar in Managua. In August of 1983, Alforja Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, published it as a small book, out of San Jose, Costa Rica. The copies sent to Nicaragua sold out in a matter of weeks. By that time the Nicaraguans had completed a successful literacy crusade (March-August, 1980) and the brigadistas--while they taught reading and writing--recorded thousands of life stories of the men and women whose customs, habits, culture, ideas had been hidden by centuries of misery, abandonment and abuse. These tapes are only now beginning to be processed, within the context of Nicaragua's continued struggle for survival as a sovereign nation.

It is no accident that testimonio or oral history as discipline has become a new and vital part of the literary as well as the social sciences scenes throughout Latin America in the years paralleling intense struggles for national liberation by peoples

Margaret Randall at workshop training Nicaraguan literacy teachers in oral history techniques and photo-story production.

on that continent. It is no accident, because recognition of, knowledge of and understanding of one's personal and collective identity is essential to people's revolution.

Margaret Randall
Albuquerque, 1984

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What Is "Testimony"?

In recent years a lot has been written about "testimonial literature." It is one of the branches of current Latin American and Cuban literature that has shown the most development and potential and has attracted the attention of writers and of the public...

What then is "testimony"? If we begin with an etymological search, we see that it has the same roots as the word "witness." According to the Spanish Academy Dictionary (1970), "the witness offers testimony about something, or s/he attests to it". Thus the witness is the person who testifies in a trial about a real event, not a fictitious one; and who states it in a direct way, not with references.

The literary works that in recent years have been called "testimonies" and which have grown out of a period of intense revolutionary activity, should not be confused with the essay form, the historical narrative, or autobiography. They do however have some obvious relation to journalism--print, radio, or television and with reports and chronicles. Their author could be a journalist or a writer; might be a participant or a principal or secondary actor in the real event that is being described; or simply an intermediary for the "testimonialist" to speak to the public.

Even though testimony as a writing genre may seem very new, it has some very distinguished predecessors; literary works of the past that have these same characteristics. The Aztec informants of Bernardino de Sahagun, who recited nahuatl poetry that had been conserved by oral tradition and who thus gave him the story of the terrible experiences of the Conquest--weren't these informants actually testimonialists?

-Salvador Bueno, Testimonio en campana, Revolucion y cultura, 71 July 1978

I. Testimony and History

Opinions vary about "testimony." It is a new genre and at this point we needn't define it too narrowly.

There are two different kinds of testimonies: testimonial works and testimony itself. In the first category we might include all testimonial literature. There are testimonial novels, theatre pieces that reflect a period in history or an event, and poetry that speaks for the people at a particular moment in time. Journalism, when it deals with important issues and when it is good, can be extremely testimonial. There are political speeches (those of Fidel Castro among others) which have a strong testimonial value. Cinematographic documents and photographic collections of an event or an historical moment, can be testimonial works of great importance.

"Testimony itself" as a literary form distinct from other forms, ought to incorporate the following elements:

- the use of primary sources;
- the presentation of a story through the voice or voices of the people who have experienced it;
- immediacy (an informant relates an event that s/he has lived; a survivor describes for us an experience that nobody else can offer);
- the use of secondary material (an introduction, other supporting interviews, documents, graphic material, chronologies and additional materials) that help to give us a living tableau of the event.
- a keen esthetic sense (crucial in the editing process).

Generally, the interview technique figures prominently in the process of collecting testimonies.

If it is the people who make history, then it is difficult for a single voice to relate it. The voice of the people is the voice of many. Nevertheless, sometimes it is possible to capture, in the voice of one man or one woman, the reality and activity of an entire people. Sometimes one person alone can represent a people. The criteria then, for choosing an informant or informants, is critical. Also, the person who writes testimonies must be conscious of his/her role as the transmitter of a voice capable of representing the masses.

The forms "testimony" and "history" are closely related. Some use the term "oral history" to refer to the story told by and collected from those who have been part of a particular historical moment or who are still making history. The unquestionable value of this kind of story is more and more recognized today. And more conventional historical tools such as archival material can be combined with living testimonies to give us a more complete vision of an event, a place, or group of people.

Whose History Are We Writing?

History has always been written by the dominant classes. We have had to learn about the Conquest of America through the writings of the conquerors. Very few tales of this experience are told from the point of view of the original inhabitants of our continent.

This practice of distorting history in support of the interests of the dominant class did not end with the conquest, nor with the first declarations of independence in our countries. It's revealing to look at the version of pre-Spanish history in the school books promoted by the United States. Through the Agency for International Development, 10 million textbooks are distributed annually in Central America. The following paragraph is an excerpt from a history book used for third grade primary school:

The Indians lived where there was gold but they didn't know its value. A Spaniard came looking for gold. The Indians showed it to him. Out of gratitude, the Spaniard taught the Indians to read and write. He also taught them to believe in God. In turn the Indians gratefully served him. They lived happily in their villages, mining the gold and cultivating the land. Later other Spaniards came and attacked the village. The Indians fled.

The son asks: "Why didn't the Indians come back?"

"Because they found a place where they could live better," answers his mother. "They realized that they had found a very beautiful place. The Indians were grateful to those who had forced them to flee."

We've all suffered through texts like these, in our own countries. Stop to think a moment about the cultural and psychological distortions that North American Indians have suffered, saturated since childhood with an image of themselves as bad, outlawish, stupid and backward. To see the extent to which this has happened, we need only look at Hollywood movies, at comic strips, radio and television programs and at the texts that pretend to tell us our history.

Until the defeat of the dictatorship in Nicaragua, "history" in this country was the same. We must begin the urgent task of uncovering and writing our own history as it really was and as it is now unfolding . . .

In our socialist context we have the possibility of writing a much more accurate history; written from the point of view of the people, the people-in-power. For the first time ordinary people are being given the tools necessary to express their culture and write their history.

Yet even under socialism there have been distortions of history: at times we are afraid to record the events as they have really

Margaret Randall

Everyone has a story to tell. Anna is 88 years old, and speaks of a life working in cork factory from the time she was 13 (photo taken in Albuquerque, New Mexico.)

been, with all their complexity, including the errors as well as the successes of revolutionaries. Sometimes we think that by changing the story a little we will be helping our cause. Nothing could be further from the truth. In order that the history we are living be really useful to our children, we must transmit it in all its richness and complexity.

There will always be a certain perspective that emerges from our ideology. So-called impartiality, as it is understood by the bourgeoisie, does not exist. However, we should not be afraid to write a history that is complex and multidimensional. If reality

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is multidimensional, then the history that reflects it must be so as well.

In Nicaragua we have the opportunity--with all its privilege and all its responsibility--to write the real history of our time.

It is important to record the testimonies of an historical moment, like the present moment in Nicaragua, before it vanishes, is forgotten or is diluted amidst other intense daily activity. What we are living and experiencing in these years is vitally important. It will be the inheritance of future generations of Nicaraguans. It will be important for the participants of future revolutions in other countries.

Let's consider the issue of truth in testimony. Sometimes fiction can present a truth that is more alive and more real than that which we call "the truth". An example of this is found in the magnificent testimonial work by Waldo Frank on Simon Bolivar: Birth of a World. His profound understanding of the period, of the history and of the principal characters, made Frank capable of writing "conversations" between Bolivar and his contempories. These are not real in the conventional sense of the word. Nevertheless, they bring the great liberator alive in a way that "absolute truth" history could never approximate.

Testimony also offers us the possibility of reconstructing the truth. The following two quotations treat the issue of "truth" in testimony in a way I think is important to share:

> *Many survivors remain from this action and each one of them is invited to leave a record of their memories to incorporate into a more complete history. We only ask that the narrator be strictly truthful; that s/he never say anything that's incorrect, in order to clarify or glorify a personal position or to pretend to have been in a particular place. We ask that, after writing some notes in the form that s/he chooses, according to his/her education and disposition, each one do a very thorough self-criticism to remove from the notes any*

word that doesn't refer to a fact that is clearly true, or in which the author does not have full confidence.

Ernesto "Che" Gueverra
Introducion a Pasaje de la guerra revolucionaria

Nine-tenths of our lives is well forgotten in the living. Of the part that is remembered, the most had better not be told; it would interest no one or, at least, would not contribute to the story of what we ourselves have been. A thin thread of narrative remains - a few hundred pages -about which clusters, like rock candy, the interests upon which the general reader will spend a few hours, as might a sweet-toothed child, preferring something richer and not so hard on the teeth. To us, however, such hours have been sweet. They constitute our particular treasure. That is all, justly, that we should offer. I can't tell more than I know. I have lived, somehow, from day to day and so I describe it, from day to day, as I have struggled to get a meaning from my failures and successes.

What could be more moving, more significant and more truthful? Every force and possibility concealed in the universe has been combined so that one thing can become as it is.

The Autobiography of Wm. Carlos Williams
New York: New Directions Pub. Corp.
1967 (1948) p. xi

The above quotations appear contradictory. Each focuses on the problem of truth from a different perspective. However isn't there a dialectic here - and both views valid?

Our Responsibilities as Chroniclers of History

> What could be more moving, more significant and more truthful? Every force and possibility concealed in the universe has been combined so that one thing can become as it is.

These lines were written about testimony by the essayist and critic James Agee who, with the photographer Walker Evans, lived with three poor farm families in the southern United States in the year 1936 and later produced one of the most extraordinary testimonies ever written about poverty in the heart of the empire. Its publication was prohibited in the U.S. until 1941 when it was published as "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men". It didn't receive international acclaim until 1960. Agee's words reflect, above all, a great respect for his informants, their lives, their aspirations, their dreams. Respect is a basic quality we should have if we are committed to writing testimonies.

When there is a real identification with the informant, the work has even greater possibilities; when it is possible for a working class person to interview a worker, for a fighter to be interviewed by someone with experience in battle, for a woman to be interviewed by another woman who is capable of understanding women's problems, or for a person who interviews a construction worker to be someone who actually knows about brick-laying etc.

The "Oscar Lewis case" illustrates this relationship in reverse. Oscar Lewis was a high profile writer of testimonies, whose books Children of Sanchez (about five working class Mexican families), Pedro Martinez (a Puerto Rican oral history), Four Men and Four Women (about Cuba) among others, are widely known. Lewis followed a very thorough technique: he had access to funds that permitted him the use of a major deployment of technical equipment and he was a good writer with broad knowledge in the field of bourgeois sociology. Nevertheless, his books are irritating. They don't reflect "the real history." He saturated all that he

wrote with his idealistic concept of the "culture of poverty."

Now we must plunge into the task of collecting and of writing the real testimonies of this glorious moment in Nicaraguan history.

II. How To Do Oral History or Testimonies

Preparation

Once the theme has been chosen and the informant(s) identified, there is preparatory work to be done. A careful preparation will affect the quality of the final product.

First, we might propose to write a testimony about a school that was destroyed by the enemy during the popular insurrection, whose teachers and students played an important role, with genuine examples of popular heroism. To that end, we have chosen as informants several surviving teachers, some students, their relatives and a neighbor from the house across the street who witnessed some of the most important events. To begin, we prepare by getting to know the history of this school, the kind of neighborhood it is located in, the social class background of the students and teachers, if there is any interesting event in the history of the school prior to the period of the insurrection or if there is a history of student activism. We'd also look at what is currently going on at the school, if it is being re-opened or if there is a popular movement organized for reconstruction.

The compañeros engaged in the testimony project will find answers to these and many other questions if they visit the neighborhood, talk with teachers, students, relatives etc. Out of

this preliminary research will come the names of other students, teachers and neighbors whose testimonies will enrich the work. The archives of the local newspaper--if there is one--will provide relevant information. What has the student activity in this school been over the years? In old newspapers we can find news of student strikes, sports activity, social and cultural events--all of which will help us formulate questions that make sense to our informants.

A good understanding of the theme and of the principal actors will help the interview process tremendously. If we are familiar with the life of our informants, our questions will make much more sense and be more coherent. If the informant feels that s/he is talking with someone who understands his/her life and his/her experience, it will be much easier to develop trust.

The above is only one example. There are as many as there are possibilities for writing testimonies. Sometimes it is necessary to probe deeper into the subject, investigating it at a national or international level. For example, suppose we were going to interview women in this country. It would be important for us to know something about the lives of Nicaraguan women, their problems, their struggles, the extent to which they are integrated into the labour force in various sectors, their working conditions, the differences between men's and women's salaries, women's illiteracy rate, the percentage of women who give birth in unsanitary conditions etc. It would be especially important to know the differences between rural and urban women and how the lives of working class women compare with those of bourgeois women. How the situation of Nicaraguan women compares with that of other countries, above all in the Central American region and in Latin America, as well as internationally would be worth exploring. In this case, we can gather valuable information from existing statistical and bibliographic sources, censuses, newspapers--especially in the economic and social sections. It will be important to interview people who work specifically with women's issues in the country as well as representatives of women's groups, militants of feminists' organizations, etc. There are many possibilities for research.

A Nicaraguan literacy teacher greets a peasant (in his militia uniform) before interviewing him at a new settlement near San Carlos, in the south of Nicaragua, where peasants have had to relocate because of the war.

It's important to stress how crucial this preparation period is - it will even help us choose our informants. We may have initially considered interviewing one person or a particular group and the preparatory work may show that there are informants with a more unique or broader experience, or who are better able to articulate their experiences.

The verbal capacity of the informant is important. There are cases - and we all know them - of people who have lived through important historical moments and who have had incredible experiences, but who don't have the verbal ability to describe them to us. We can also find the contrary: people whose

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experience has not been so unique, but who have a natural gift for "storytelling". There are times when both kinds of people should be interviewed. We might find ourselves confronted with a situation where a compañera has been so traumatized by an experience that she has difficulty talking about it. Nevertheless, we should try to get to know her; with patience and understanding we can help her communicate so that her experience can serve others. We must explain to her that our purpose in asking her questions is not to make her suffer once more, but to assure her testimony be recognized for its historical value. Faced with someone whose experience doesn't really relate to the work we're doing, but who "wants to talk", we should know how to listen while at the same time not investing too much time in this kind of interview. It may be that this person's life experience is not what we are looking for but in our conversation, without even realizing it, s/he may lead us to others whose testimony would be more useful.

The Questionnaire

Once enough existing information is gathered, the next step is preparing a questionnaire. The questionnaire draws on what we've learned about the background of the subject, the events and the people.

The questionnaire should not be a rigid tool. It should start with general information about the person: name, age, home town, occupation etc.. Sometimes you will need answers to precise questions. Other times we will be able to talk about general areas of interest. For example, we may want to know something about the origins and the life history of our informant - that would be a general interest area. Or we may want to know how s/he participated in the events that interest us and how s/he interprets those events.

To a great extent the personality of the informant will determine how we proceed with the questions. There are people who give very general responses to our questions, like "yes" or "no", while

others are anxious to talk and keep straying from the subject. For some people, it is enough to guide them with a small question or reference now and then and they go on developing a testimony so coherent that it will need very little work once it's transcribed. Others talk about a million things, jumping back and forth in time. It's not unusual for people to contradict themselves, not because 'they aren't telling the truth", but rather because they forget and later remember different aspects or because the very act of beginning to remember helps them little by little to order their thoughts while they are talking.

All of this is because each person has his/her own reasons for talking about his/her life; each is in this sense esponding to internal needs at the same time as responding to our need to gather the testimony. It is essential that we learn to explain our motives clearly. It can make a big difference if the informant really understands the purpose of our interview and how his/her words are going to be used. Of course, it helps if we know the person we are interviewing. It's not the same to interview a stranger as it is to interview our own grandfather, for example. We already know him, his habits, his way of speaking, his personality and we also know a lot about him through our relationships with other family members and through our own experience.

When it is not possible to know the informant (in projects, for example, about Nicaraguan women, dockworkers or construction workers, etc.), it is sometimes advisable to work with third persons who can serve as "bridges", people who are close to the informants and whose presence helps develop trust. On the other hand, there are times when the opposite occurs - that is, when too many "participants" can inhibit an interview. So sometimes, it is productive to develop a relationship between the interviewer and the informant without the presence of other people. We may have special problems in managing our time in interviews with children and with older people and have to make adjustments accordingly. We have to learn how to work in different situations and to confront a variety of communication problems.

The Art of the Question

The skill of posing questions deserves special attention. The kinds of questions we ask can make a tremendous difference in our results and thus should be developed very carefully. We shouldn't ask questions that have answers hidden within them. In the majority of cases, questions should be neutral or open. For example, if we ask "Can you stand so-and-so?" it's clear that "so-and-so" is a person with negative qualities. Our informant may, even unconsciously, pick up on our prejudice; answering "no" or "yes, s/he hasn't been so bad with me" etc.. We would learn more if we posed the question like this: "What do you think of so-and-so?" The informant will feel freer to tell us what s/he really thinks. Once s/he has given us his/her opinion, we can use his/her response to formulate the next questions, always trying to get the informant to deepen his/her testimony.

In summary: it's important to understand our subject, to have as much information as possible about the people, the events, the setting. It's advisable to prepare a list of questions, even though we should be flexible and know how to take advantage of a story, a comment, or an opinion outside of the structure of the questionnaire.

Knowledge of Technical Equipment

Getting to know your equipment is an important aspect of the preparation. It is essential you understand how to use your tape recorder - try it beforehand and become technically familiar with it and able to operate it easily.

Often the tape recorder may impress and inhibit people for whom it's not so common. It often helps to start the interview by explaining how the tape recorder works, then let the informant listen to his/her own voice and even promise that s/he'll be able to hear at least part of the interview after it's over. On other occasions, it may be better to make it less conspicuous - placing it out of the way, where it can still record the testimony but

will not constantly intimidate the person being interviewed. For each of these different uses, it's important to know the equipment. You need to know exactly how far away the tape recorder can be and still get a good recording of the voices.

It's always a good idea to test the voices before beginning; talk a few minutes with the person, have him/her speak into the recorder, stop the machine, rewind the tape and listen to it before actually beginning the interview itself. There have been too many cases where an interview was not recorded. This can be very serious, especially when it is not easy to set up a second meeting. It is always better to take the time necessary to check these things first, rather than regretting it later.

It may seem unnecessary to mention but it is also important to take good care of the technical equipment. These are tools that have been entrusted to us - in this case, by our own people. We are responsible for equipment that represents an investment of financial resources in a difficult time. Minimal care can assure that a tape recorder, camera or typewriter, etc. lasts for a very long time. The first rule is one of cleanliness; a tape recorder should be cleaned with a bit of alcohol after every ten hours of use. When it's not being used, the batteries should be removed.

Tape Recording

Remember:

- It is better to use a tape recorder that can be plugged into an electric socket. That way you avoid the danger of dead batteries.
- Bring along an extension cord so you can position yourself or the tape recorder in the best location.
- If you have to rely on batteries, bring extras. Remove batteries when the tape recorder is not in use.

A Nicaraguan literacy teacher interviews another teacher in San Juan de Limay in the north of Nicaragua, while neigbourhood children listen in.

- Have a watch or clock within sight so you know when your tape will run out. It is terribly disappointing to finish an interview and discover that you've missed the most interesting or important reminiscences.

- Sixty or ninety minute cassettes are best. One hundred and twenty minute cassettes have the thinnest tape and have a tendency to break.

- Immediately before or after the interview session, label the cassette, including the name of the informant, the interviewer and the date.

- A tape recorder should be cleaned with a bit of alcohol after every ten hours of use.

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The Interview

- Interviewing requires empathy, patience and calm.
- Try and choose a place where you won't be interrupted by noise, telephones and other people.
- Come to the interview prepared, having thoroughly researched the person or event.
- You may want to ask your informant to dig out photographs, newspaper clippings and other momentos as a reminder or a starting point.
- The questions you have prepared are a guide, not a script. If the informant has raised something of interest you hadn't anticipated - pursue it, rather than be concerned about moving on to each question at a constant pace.
- If a question occurs to you in the middle of a long answer, write it down in your notepad and return to it later.
- Begin the interview slowly, asking for childhood memories and general impressions. Leave specific or difficult questions until it is appropriate and some degree of trust and communication has been established.
- Remember that a person's experience and memories should be treated with respect and sensitivity.

The Notebook

Always carry a notebook for recording relevant details of the interview such as:

- a physical description of the setting in order to recreate it later, if necessary;
- a description of the person;
- other attitudes or ideas that come to us in the midst of the interview (for example; "verify a particular piece of information"; "check dates"; "contact another person mentioned by the informant" etc.).

If you are taking photographs the little book can be used to make note of the numbers of the rolls relating to each interview, special instruction for film processing, etc.

To sum up then:

- study the background and context of the subject, people, events;
- develop a list of questions relevant to the proposed project;
- prepare your notebook;
- get to know the technical equipment, try it out before each interview (check the batteries, recharge them if using rechargeable batteries) and keep the equipment clean;
- be ready to adapt to the informant's situation, choose a time that's convenient, etc. Try to create the best possible conditions so that informants will feel relaxed and ready to communicate.

What is "Primary" Material?

The primary material, or raw data, of a testimony includes the transcribed interviews, additional materials resulting from previous studies and research carried out in the midst of gathering testimonies, photographs and any other graphic material and all the ideas that you've developed, right from the planning stages until the end. If you are working in a team, this collection of ideas should be the result of regular meetings of all the project participants.

Transcription

Transcription of the interview should be done very carefully, preferably by someone who understands the dialect of the informant, who is familiar with the colloquialisms and is capable of producing an accurate transcription. Include everything.

Transcriptions should be reliable and complete, even when we know we are going to use no more than fragments in the final product. Selecting and editing comes later, once all the material is transcribed. If the tone of voice of the informant, or his/her way of stressing a particular fact or word tells us something, make a note of this in parentheses in the transcription. If the informant laughs or cries at some point while talking, this too should be noted in parentheses.

During this phase of data collection, studies, interviews and transcription, the rule is to maintain an attitude of inclusion in every sense. Nothing should be excluded. There should be regular meetings for analysis of the work and critique/self-critique of the participation of each team member in order to deepen your understanding of the material. Decisions about how to use or not use the material are better made with all of the raw material in hand.

Choices about what to cut are made during the later stages of assembling the testimony, when you start to think more systematically about the final form the testimony with take

A Word Archives

You must also think about what to do with the recorded tapes or cassettes, especially when gathering testimonies from highly esteemed people or on subjects of particular importance. The wisest thing to do would be to store these live testimonies in an archives. Normally the cassette tape is transferred to reel-to-reel tape that is catalogued and stored in a clean, dry place. In this way an "oral archives" can be developed, serving as a valuable historical and cultural heritage for the people.

Of course, we must adapt to the objective conditions of the moment: budget, personnel, space etc. Many times, no doubt, you'll work in conditions where you'll record on a cassette tape, transcribe it and use it again, erasing the preceding interview because there are neither cassettes, tapes, archives nor enough funds to propose any other alternative.

A leader of the CDS's (Sandinista Defense Committees) is being interviewed.

The most important thing is to gather the testimony when the informant is in the best condition to offer it. If it is possible to preserve the live testimony afterwards, all the better. And better still if there is an awareness of the value of an archive for the future.

Ethics

The ethics with which we must work should always be taken into account. Most important are the wishes of the informant. There are valid and important reasons why a person might not want to publish a testimony that has implications for his/her personal life, for example.

The words you will record are the property of the informant. It is necessary to obtain their permission to use them. You might want to use a simple agreement, signed by both the informant and interviewer like the one shown below:

I hereby agree to being interviewed by (name of interviewer or project) and subject to the conditions noted below , I release all rights to this recording to the (project or name of interviewer).

Conditions __ none: __ or

_____

_____

_____

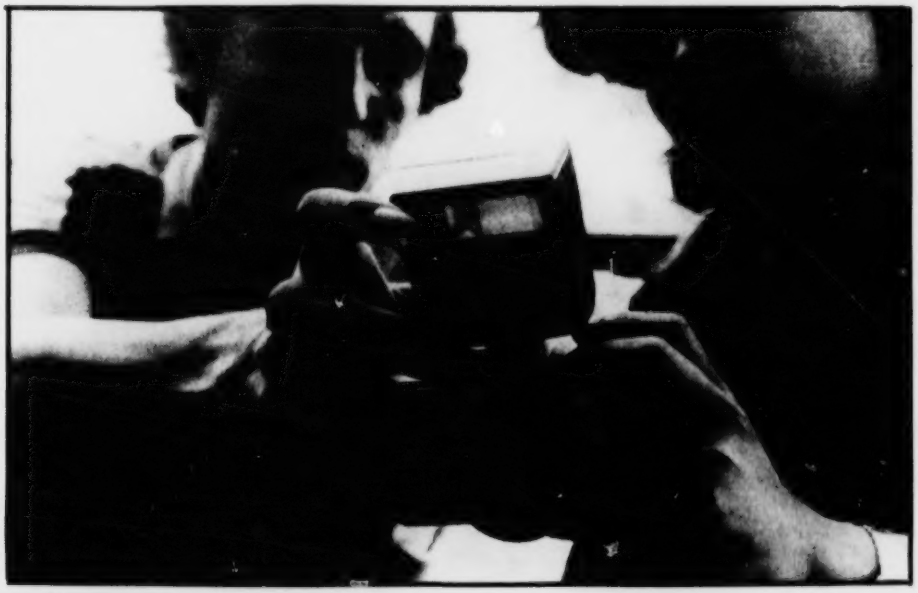
_____

Date:_____ Signature of informant

Signature of interviewer

This is intended as a rough guide only. For more expert legal advice, a lawyer should be consulted.

Any restrictions on the use of the testimony should be specified clearly in the agreement. These may be that use of the tapes be restricted until a certain date or that portions of the interview should not be used until a certain date. The project must respect and honour any restrictions placed by the informant. This is also a good time to ask the informant if s/he has any questions about the use of his/her testimony. The interviewer should answer these questions clearly and strive to make her/him feel comfortable about the interview process.



A Nicaraguan photographer shows a literacy teacher how to use a simple camera so that she can take pictures to accompany the oral histories she's gathering for literacy materials.

III. Complementary Work

In gathering complementary work to support and enrich a testimony, the guide should always be "What more is there to know about this subject?" Everything should be investigated: the history of the place and of the persons; relevant statistics and the importance of the events locally, nationally and internationally.

Everything interests us. Everything can be useful. This is expecially true during the stages of preparation and collection of primary sources. Later, in the assembly stage, there is the opportunity to discard, to reduce, to trim down. Just as it is necessary at earlier stages to include everything, later it will be important to know what and how to exclude. For this reason, we should never promise an informant that his/her testimony will appear in published form. Thank him/her for her/his contribution to a greater understanding of our subject, nothing more.

Sometimes the so-called complementary work becomes primary. This can happen when we try to recreate the life of a martyr. We have more than enough examples in Nicaragua today. Let's imagine for a moment that our task is to do a testimony of a Sandinista martyr. We have to look for people who knew the person in different periods of his/her life. His/her family members give us the names of his/her first teacher, his/her childhood friends and school friends who are still living, compañeras who fought with him/her -and others. Once we're able to trace his/her movement through different parts of the country, we can go to sources of information like local publications etc. to look for his/her life reflected in actions, events and collective deeds. You may even have to look outside the country; perhaps the compañera or compañero lived in exile for a considerable time and it would be valuable to trace his/her steps through other lands as well.

Little by little - through records, documents, articles, photos and other materials - we will reach the point where we can really imagine this person as a human being - constantly evolving, moving, alive; and our image will not be like the boring biographical sketches where we so often find statistical rhetoric instead of the sparkle of his/her eyes and the warmth of his/her hands.

Even when the main characters are still living and can tell their own stories, it's important to use supporting material and to check the facts (especially dates and numbers). In the intensity of living these moments, many of the details get lost. The memory of two people, of fifteen, of a newspaper with the date appearing in black-and-white, combine to be more reliable than the memory of one person.

Supporting Materials

Testimonial work should harmoniously combine the conventional work of the patient historian (who is expert in researching archives, libraries, publication collections, museums, etc.) and the work of a new kind of historian (who can capture the human dimension of facts, deeds, places and the living voice of people). Whatever we choose from either approach, it should have a focus and a purpose.

Sometimes we find ourselves embroiled in the polemic of "oral history" vs. "written history". Even these terms are misleading.

Oral history is, as the name implies, history that is related orally. Sometimes it rises out of a tradition that is among the richest cultural inheritances of a people. Once it is gathered, it is no longer only oral because it is written down so that it can be known to a much broader audience.

Actually most history ends up in written form, at least if it is to be broadly diffused. The term "prehistoric" does not refer to a time before there was history (what kind of time could that be?)

but rather to the era before history was written. Even then we are talking about writing that we know of. Before the alphabet that we use today, there were hieroglyphical characters, drawings and other signs that help us to decipher the history of the human race even when it was in the process of evolving into its present form.

Obviously the voice is tremendously important in oral history; the testimony is transmitted by living voices. However if a testimony is to be more than just a story, more than the version of an individual or of a group of individuals - in other words, for it to be history - it has to be supported by a series of secondary testimonies, documents and graphic material. Often a chronology is included to help put specific events in a broader, historical context. An introduction (written when the testimonial work is finished) provides the setting and lays the ground for what is to come, explains its importance and offers information about where and when the testimony was done.

If the work is done by a team, these two kinds of histories can be done simultaneously. Often some compañeros are more interested in one kind of work. When that's not the case, each member of the collective should be responsible for specific research and part of the interviews. If there is a division of labour and some take on the purely testimonial work while others verify data and search for supporting documents, there should be regular meetings between both groups so that the focus is maintained and common criteria applied. What is most interesting about testimonial history is that it requires us to be, at the same time, sociologist, psychologist, social anthropologist, historian, ethnographer, folklorist and writer.

Graphic Material

There are certain kinds of graphic material that can be very important in bringing new life to a testimony. First of all, photography. All the informants should be photographed. More useful than a photo of the person during the interview is a photo

of the person involved in his/her work, with his/her family, in his/her daily life. If the informant is one of the principal characters of the testimony, or if the testimony is about the whole life of a person, try to find photographs from his/her birth and onwards, if possible. Sometimes relatives and friends can supply photos and often newspaper or magazine archives can offer them. Also, when a place plays an important part in a story, it's necessary to photograph it.

Until now, we have spoken of photography as material to support the written text. Photography also can be a testimony in itself. When a writer or an oral historian and a photographer work together on a testimonial project, it's possible to produce a work in which the visual image and the written word are two elements that live and complement each other, not just "support" each other. Generally, in order for this to happen, both the writer and the photographer working on the project should be experienced and identify strongly with their craft. But the results of such collaboration can be very rich, bringing a dimension that surpasses the value of each separate element.

Maps and charts can also be useful, as well as photocopies of official documents like certificates of birth, baptism, marriage, death etc. Sometimes this type of document can be found in the civil registry or in a local church. Some public offices provide their own photocopy services. If you have to photocopy these documents without professional assistance, or if it involves copying documents that someone wants to keep in the house or perhaps doesn't want to lend out, take the paper in question into natural light if possible, put it on the floor, and photograph it with a normal lens (50mm if you have it) from above with the least possible distortion; or attach the paper to the wall for the same effect. Film with a low ASA (25 or so) will give you maximum contrast and a minimum of gray in the copy.

At times the interviewer will also be the photographer, will look for maps and charts and will make other graphic materials. If you have compañeros experienced in photography - this helps - just as

the help of typists, artists, designers, cartoonists etc. can make the work much richer. Usually complementary work and the primary task of the testimony are done jointly--so that one influences the other.

This completes the work of compiling the primary material and takes us to the assembly stage.

IV. Montage Or Assembling Of The Testimony

The montage is perhaps the most emotional stage of testimonial work. We have everything in front of us and are going to transform the raw material into a form that can be shared with others. There are no rigid rules in assembling testimony. The following are suggestions of some methods that have worked in the past and might be helpful in the future. Most important is that the final work be useful, clear, beautiful and communicate effectively.

The assembly stage includes the selection we make from all the materials we have collected up until now and the final editing (correcting the style, polishing the form and deciding the order each element will have within the final product). For a group of compañeros who have worked together for weeks or even months, who have collectively and exhaustively researched an event or a person and who have, in the process, developed many ideas about the event or person, the assembly stage is an opportunity to collaborate to make a final product which will reach the reading public in the richest, most complete and most communicative form possible. This moment in the process demands special creativity and inventiveness.

Nicaraguan teachers, having transcribed oral histories, are editing them for photo-stories to be used in literacy classes.

The key word here is communication. We want to communicate with our readers. We want to transmit to them not only certain information with its multiple facets but, more importantly, we want them to be touched by what they read; to feel what we feel, to understand -- in the time it takes to read a book or testimonial work -- what we have come to understand through a long period of work.

The first questions we should ask ourselves are: why are we doing this testimony? To whom is it directed ? Our answers will be an important guide as we start to assemble the testimony in its final form. We should refer back to them at each step of the assembling process.

Next, we should do an inventory of everything we have at hand. Suppose there are six interviews and twenty-two secondary interviews which can be excerpted to support the primary testimonies. We have collected, as well, a good quantity of relevant statistical data and graphic material, including photographs, photocopies of documents, newspaper clippings and a map showing the area of concern without much detail. This is the moment to have a better map made, based on what we've learned by experts who, understanding our needs, can develop more detail.

It may take several working sessions, reading aloud and collectively all the collected material, to decide how we want to assemble it. Perhaps it will seem best to develop a coherent story line, from beginning to end, in chronological order; the testimonies of three of the key informants will help do this. Perhaps joining the three testimonies will give a multidimensional vision of the subject, because of the differences in origin, age, and occupation. In this way, we decide that the other three testimonies which we had seen as primary material will, in fact, form part of the supporting material. From these and from the other twenty-two secondary interviews, we choose fragments that will help accentuate the focus, expand points, add an anecdote or corroborate certain facts. Perhaps it would be effective to interrupt the story periodically with a frame or box containing statistical data, a photocopied document or newspaper clipping. Or perhaps the statistical material is more appropriate in the introduction.

The best place for the introduction, of course, is at the beginning. And as we've already said, the introduction should be written after everything else is done. It's only then that all the different elements are in hand so we know what we want to emphasize and we know if it is necessary to clarify points that perhaps weren't clear in the actual body of the work. There may be times when the usual introductory essay isn't necessary; where it is better to start off with the testimony itself. An epilogue or final notes may be more appropriate. Normally chronologies go at the end of a work.

In my own experience, I once interviewed a compañera with a great consciousness of her social and political role and of the times she is living. She also had a great ability to express herself. The montage of this testimony had a short introduction followed by the uninterrupted story of the compañera. All reference to the interviewer was removed. An historical chronology and graphic material completed the book.

In another case, I gathered the testimony of an older woman, a patriot of a Latin American country, a distinguished figure in the struggle of her family, capable of giving us fragments of her life with depth and poetry. What she didn't do was locate her personal story in time or space. We made up for this deficiency by dividing the testimony more or less in decades and introducing a second narrative, composed of paragraphs that give a general sense of the life of the woman, of her country, of the social and economic context of each historical period.

In yet another instance, the subject was a Cuban campesino, a man who writes theatrical works on campesino themes, in ten-line stanzas. Not only does this man speak in poetic form but he also has wonderful dreams. In the course of working with him, he began to send us little pieces of paper with things he remembered; dreams, fantastic tales and sayings that incorporated the campesino wisdom of the area. The montage of this work started with an introduction and followed with the story of the man. However, every three or four pages we inserted a dream, an anecdote or a short legend. We were careful to make sure that the content of each frame had an essential relationship with the part of the story being told at that moment. We also created another level of text: with the voices of other informants, friends from his youth, a teacher, members of a local popular theatre group and other local poets with their stanzas. We included two pieces of theatre typical of this popular playwright. At the end of the work we put together a vocabulary glossary. The speech of the central protagonist, as well as of the other informants in the book, was so rich in invented words and local expressions that we decided it was necessary to explain these words and phrases in order to better communicate with our readers.

This leads to the issue of how true we must be to the exact spoken words of our subjects. Should we transcribe the voice of a man or a woman exactly as they speak?

Of course there are guidelines for this, the first regarding basic clean-up. In daily conversation everyone tends to use "crutches" -- we say "uhh...," "ehh...," "this," "isn't it so?", etc. Or we sometimes begin a phrase with words and end it with a glance or with a shrug of the shoulders. Neither the glance nor the shrug are easily translated onto paper. The conversation should be cleaned up to avoid repetition of crutch-words and to give a syntactic coherence to the testimony. In all of this we must be careful not to betray the informant. This is not difficult once we accustom ourselves to this kind of style, correction or editing.

Ministry of Education staff put together oral histories with photos that will be used as learning materials in literacy texts.

However, the question of whether or not we should change the way a person speaks often goes much beyond the issue of simple repetitions or crutch-words. A person from the countryside or a person from a specific region may speak in a special way, with certain constructions and word uses that might be considered outside the realm of accepted language. How much of "natural speech" should we let flourish in the final testimony? We think it is almost always good to transcribe these particular dialects faithfully. They are part of our national heritage.

It's never possible to separate form from content, nor is it desirable to do so. There's great poetry and at times great wisdom in different regions and people's Spanish ways of speaking. Assumptions like "In that place they speak poorly" or "that country's Spanish is very bad" are not acceptable in producing testimony. The linguistic culture of Cuba, Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile, Subtiava, Monimbo or of any other place, is as rich as that of old Castile in the heart of mother Spain. A place's culture and language are intimately linked and interrelated. It's as important for us to know the typical speech of heroic Monimbo,[1] as to know the orthodox speech of the Spanish highlands. Today it is perhaps even more important to know Monimbo. It is important to let the voice of the people be known as it is. Of course, everything has its limits. We should never ridicule informants, by transcribing testimonial language without the basic polishing described above.

Another fundamental editing task is to give it coherence to the testimony. It's natural when a person speaks and above all when

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1. The people of the Monimbo barrio in Masaya, Nicaragua, make up one of the few indigenous communities left in the Pacific area of Nicaragua, after colonization by the Spanish. Very poor economically yet rich in their world-recognized artisan skills, they were the first community to organize a spontaneous uprising against the Somoza dictatorship and remained combative throughout the insurrection. Subtiava is another indigenous community near Leon with similar characteristics.

A union leader in a milk factory enjoys seeing the photos and oral history that he offered now in print, as fellow workers look on.

s/he has to search into his/her memory about an event or sequence of events, that s/he tends to jump back and forth in time. In the final edition, the story should be as clear as possible. Most often the text should be given a chronological order.

Once, during the montage phase of a testimonial book, I removed all the furniture from a room and sat down on the floor with the stacks of testimony gathered during several months of work. I arranged the piles of pages according to approximate dates and right there and then, with a pair of scissors, gave shape to the book. In places where the informant had remembered something from the past, while relating his life of several years later, I cut the sections, returning the excavated moments back to their actual time frame.

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Chronological order is not the only possible solution to the problem of order in assembling a testimony. There are many alternatives. While working with testimonies of women in the Chilean resistance, I decided to group them into chapters, each dealing with a central concern of the women in struggle: how women developed an active political commitment; how political activity was combined with personal relationships or with their role as mothers; experiences of women leaders; experiences of torture, etc. Doing this kind of montage means fragmenting the interviews. Each woman interviewed had something to say about most of these different aspects of life. And so each chapter, in the final montage of that collective testimony, presented a collage carefully constructed with several voices.

In summary, there are many ways to put together a testimonial book. It can be done chronologically, thematically, on one level only or on various levels. The primary material that we have should give us clearer ideas about how to edit it. The criteria that take precedence over others should always be those of communication, clarity, agility and amenity. We should avoid repetition and rhetoric. The most powerful facts speak for themselves.

Another question arises during this phase: should the author or authors be present in the testimony? Sometimes it is necessary that the voice asking questions be there, as well as the voices of those who respond but wherever possible, nothing is lost--and almost always something is gained--by removing the voice of the questioner. Small changes can be made in the responses so that what remains reads like a continuous story. Consider this dialogue, for example:

"Can you tell us something about what happened to you on the 2nd of May?"

"Well, yes...that day I was in school and..."

The response can be changed in the following way without betraying the real meaning: "On the second of May I was in school and..."

V. How To Judge Our Work

Something else to take great care of--and which is of vital importance--is the esthetic value of the work. Not enough can be said about the importance of the literary quality of a testimonial text. Art that serves the people serves them better when it is of high quality. We too often suffer from rhetoric, pamphleteering or a trite, cheap style in art or literature that hits us over the head with its message. In testimony we also want to give a message. We have a lot to say and we have the obligation to transmit the voice of the people who have even more to express. The real voice of the people is a fresh voice - beautiful and always new. Authentic popular culture doesn't have anything to do with the pamphlets that people too often try to make us swallow.

At no time does this mean "lowering the level of the work so that the people can understand it". The cultural attitude of a genuine revolution incorporates just the opposite concept; that of raising the cultural level of the people so that they can not only understand more refined work but also so that they can produce it themselves. Of course, this is a process; a long process that begins with the triumph of the Revolution itself. The first great task was the teaching of literacy throughout the country.

The esthetic value of a finished testimonial work is determined by how long-lasting it is. The esthetic value often separates the work that remains, that survives years and events, from a simple journalistic account that deals with the same subject.

Finally, I'd like to suggest an experiment that could be carried out within a process like the Nicaraguan revolution. The idea

would be to choose a testimonial theme that would be useful in helping people to understand an important historical event in depth. After publishing the testimony cheaply and in an accessible form, distribute it among a particular control population say 5,000 secondary school students, an equal number of Sandinista soldiers, or groups of students, soldiers and housewives. With the work, also distribute a small questionnaire, well thought through, to collect general data from the reader regarding his/her educational level, etc. Include questions about the way the testimony is put together:

- o How does the message get through?
- o Can everything in the book be understood?
- o What other themes would they like to see treated in the same form?
- o What critiques would they make of this work?

The analysis of the responses would help in a useful way with ongoing work.

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